
Wissenschaftliche Langbeiträge

Intersectional approaches to anti-sexism and anti-racism in German universities: A case study

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze anti-sexism and anti-racism work at universities from the perspective of institutional analysis. Our theoretical background is based in feminist institutional theory. The websites of a Higher Education Institution are viewed as a self-image of the university consisting of information on anti-discrimination on campus. The case study sheds light on broader anti-discrimination work at European Research Area (ERA). The challenge for diversity policy is to effectively address anti-racism and anti-sexism by explicitly naming and combating racializing and sexist discourses and structures.

Keywords: intersectionality, diversity politics, feminist institutionalism, power, marginalization

Intersektionale Zugänge zu Antisexismus und Antirassismus an deutschen Universitäten: Eine Fallstudie

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel analysieren wir den Einsatz für Antisexismus und Antirassismus an Universitäten aus der Perspektive der Institutionenanalyse. Unser theoretischer Hintergrund basiert auf der feministischen Institutionentheorie. Das Selbstverständnis einer Hochschuleinrichtung, wie auch der Auf- und Ausbau von Antidiskriminierungsstrukturen werden anhand der Websites einer Hochschuleinrichtung analysiert. Die Fallstudie wirft ein Licht auf die breitere Antidiskriminierungsarbeit im Europäischen Forschungsraum (ERA). Die Herausforderung für die Diversitätspolitik besteht darin, Antirassismus und Antisexismus wirksam zu bekämpfen, indem rassistische und sexistische Diskurse und Strukturen ausdrücklich benannt und bekämpft werden.

Schlagwörter: Intersektionalität, Diversitätspolitik, feministischer Institutionalismus, Macht, Marginalisierung

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are shaped by the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, politics, and policies, which are influenced by the culture and history of their respective societies (Bourdieu 1988; Thompson/Vorbrugg 2018: 84; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018). Within educational systems, HEIs establish their own mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, affecting the likelihood of success for various groups within the system. These mechanisms often conflict with the meritocratic principle of equal opportunities (Alon 2009). This issue encompasses not only gender but also other factors, such as the opportunities for individuals from low-income and/or migrant backgrounds to enter, succeed, and advance in academic careers, as well as the inclusion of people with disabilities. Universities and educational systems play a crucial role in studying, exposing, reflecting on, educating about, and working to mitigate the systemic and structural barriers, obstacles, and often implicit and unconscious biases. Furthermore, knowledge producing institutions have a mandate to contribute to and facilitate democracy building and cultivating participatory citizenry.

Matters of gender equity and diversity are linked to the aforementioned societal functions of HEIs. Due to political and financial incentives, such as the Excellence Initiative of the federal and state governments as well as programs and guidelines to promote gender equality in science, increasingly differentiated priorities, and complex practices for gender equality have become established in Germany. Initiatives such as the research-oriented gender equality standards of the German Research Foundation (DFG), the female professors program and recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat) have contributed to the establishment of various conceptual approaches to gender equality in recent decades (Lipinsky 2017: 23). Moreover, gender equity has increasingly been recognized as requiring an intersectional perspective. However, efforts remain largely focused on increasing the representation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. The integration of diversity as a strategic goal and its institutionalization by university administrations signify a shift from social advocacy to a managerial responsibility. This development underscores the growing importance of diversity for universities and the need to implement institutional measures to fulfil the commitments outlined in their policies and mission statements.

Discourses on diversity date back to the Civil Rights Movement and the related civil rights legislation in the United States. These laid the groundwork in the 1960s to codify measures for the fair treatment of disadvantaged minorities: “Affirmative Action [...] was initiated as a key institutional instrument for attempting a course of action to promote equal opportunities, fight discrimination and help minorities gain better positions in employment and education” (Vertovec 2012: 289). Since then, discourses about diversity have reflected increasing social differences in pluralistic societies and can be found especially in Western societies in a variety of their institutions – such as HEIs, NGOs, in government agencies, the European Union, or in private companies. The focus is on the success of organizational goals and the consideration of different social and demographic factors as well as anti-discrimination (Klein 2018).

In this article, we analyze the intersections between anti-sexism and anti-racism at universities from the perspective of institutional analysis (Posselt et al. 2020; Acker 1990). In doing so, we focus on how diversity policies are implemented in promoting equal participation and representation in German HEIs. Our primary objective is to critically assess whether these policies transcend symbolic gestures addressing the entire university community and actively enforce substantive changes materializing in actionable practices that ensure equitable access and opportunities within HEIs. We develop this analysis through a case study, examining the diversity and anti-discrimination strategies at Ruhr University Bochum